

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
GRAND JUNCTION Field Office
2815 H ROAD
GRAND JUNCTION, CO 81506**

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

NUMBER: CO-134-2005-010-EA

CASEFILE/PROJECT NUMBER:

PROJECT NAME: Rabbit's Ear Mesa Loop Trail and Re-route

PLANNING UNIT: McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area (Recreation Management Zone 1)

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: T 10S, R 104, W Sections 11,12,13,14

APPLICANT: BLM

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE ACTION: The original trail was designed as a point destination to overlook the Colorado River. When that destination is reached users have began to walk the rest of the rim to see other parts of the river. This use has resulted in impacts such as braiding of trails on the mesa top. With a designated trail system that loops around the mesa top we hope to reduce these effects. This trail was originally designed in the late 80s and we are now seeing some of the impacts that time and weather have had on it. One section of the trail is showing incredible amounts of erosion. We hope to reroute this portion of the trail segment and reduce those effects.

BACKGROUND: The Rabbit Ear Trail is located within the McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area (MCNCA) adjacent to I-70 approximately 30 miles west of Grand Junction Colorado. Rabbit Ear Mesa is approximately 1 mile from the Rabbit Ear Trailhead. The Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge Integrated Resource Management Plan as well as the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Proposed Resource Management Plan support this action.

Existing recreation opportunities present in this area include hiking, viewing scenery and natural features. This trail expansion will give the hiker the opportunity to have spectacular views of Black Ridge Wilderness towards the South, Ruby Canyon towards the West and Rabbit Valley towards the Northwest. Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado (VOC) have showed interest in adopting this project in 2006. In addition, Beckworth Mountain Club has committed to assisting us with this project in June of 2005. With this large workforce we hope to construct the main loop as well as some re-routes on the existing trail. Years of weather and high use have

combined to create erosion problems on parts of the existing trail. This re-route and trail addition will give us the ability to have a sustainable trail system on Rabbit Ear Mesa.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

PROPOSED ACTION: The proposed action is to authorize the construction of approximately 2 miles of new trail. This would extend the existing Rabbit Ear trail around the rim of Rabbit Ear Mesa creating a loop. Construction of the new trail would consist of rock cairns to establish a path, hand tool use to clear the route of obstructions, and some rock cribbing installed to prevent soil erosion on major turns and elevation transitions. In addition we would like to create an additional re-route on the existing trail. Inadequate layout of the trail has created some unmanageable erosion problems. If this sections of the trail is not re-routed the problem can and will continue to worsen and resource damage may be irreversible. Upon completion of the re-route we will rehabilitate the original route to a natural state. This might include transplanting vegetation within the disturbed area. To ease the transition of elevation onto the upper part of the mesa we hope to install some steps. This would consist of approximately 35 feet of stone steps. Currently the soil consists of clay and during times low to moderate moisture this surface tread becomes very slippery. If we install steps using native stone this can help alleviate some of these safety concern as well as maintaining a natural look.

Please refer to map for details.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: The no action alternative would not complete the loop/reroute as the agency committed itself to in the Resource Management Plan. With a no action alternative resource damage will continue to occur and effects may be irreversible.

PLAN CONFORMANCE REVIEW: The Proposed Action is subject to and has been reviewed for conformance with the following plan (43 CFR 1610.5, BLM 1617.3):

Name of Plan: Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area and BRCW RMP

Date Approved: October 2004,

Decision Number/Page: 2-38

Decision Language: Continue the existing route that extends the end of the Rabbit's Ear trail to create a designated loop trail on top of the mesa.

Modify roads and trails as needed to mitigate impacts.

Standards for Public Land Health: In January 1997, the Colorado State Office of the BLM approved the Standards for Public Land Health and amended all RMPs in the State. Standards describe the conditions needed to sustain public land health and apply to all uses of public lands.

Standard 1: Upland soils exhibit infiltration and permeability rates that are appropriate to soil type, climate, land form, and geologic processes.

Standard 2: Riparian systems associated with both running and standing water function properly and have the ability to recover from major disturbance such as fire, severe grazing, or 100-year floods.

Standard 3: Healthy, productive plant and animal communities of native and other desirable species are maintained at viable population levels commensurate with the species and habitat's potential.

Standard 4: Special status, threatened and endangered species (federal and state), and other plants and animals officially designated by the BLM, and their habitats are maintained or enhanced by sustaining healthy, native plant and animal communities.

Standard 5: The water quality of all water bodies, including ground water where applicable, located on or influenced by BLM lands will achieve or exceed the Water Quality Standards established by the State of Colorado.

Standards describe conditions needed to sustain public land health and relate to all uses of the public lands. Because a standard exists for these five categories, a finding must be made for each of them in an environmental analysis. These findings are located in specific elements listed below:

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES / MITIGATION MEASURES:**

CRITICAL ELEMENTS

The following critical elements have been analyzed and are not present and/or will not be affected; Air Quality, Areas Of Critical Environmental Concern, Environmental Justice, Prime and Unique Farmlands, Floodplains, Hazardous or Solid Wastes, Wetlands and Riparian Zones, Wilderness, and Wild And Scenic Rivers.

AIR QUALITY

Affected Environment: There are no designated Class I air sheds located within Mesa county; the nearest Class I areas are 50+ air miles away, with the Flattops and Maroon Bells wilderness areas and Black Canyon NP being the closest. The EPA general conformity rule requires a formal conformity determination document for federally sponsored or funded actions in nonattainment areas, or in certain designated maintenance areas when the total direct and indirect net emissions of nonattainment pollutants (or their precursors) exceed specified levels. Since the project area is not within a nonattainment area, Clean Air Act conformity does not apply.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: None

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Affected Environment: A records search of the general project area, and a Class III inventory of the Area of Potential Effect, as defined in the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), was

completed by the BLM Archaeologist, (GJFO CRIR file 1005-21). Three newly recorded sites, 5ME15066 – 5ME15068 and one previously recorded site 5ME6800 were identified by the inventory. 5ME6800 is recommended as potentially eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. The other sites are recommended Not Eligible. The project is in compliance with the NHPA, the Colorado State Protocol Agreement, and other federal law, regulation, policy, and guidelines regarding the identification and evaluation of cultural resources.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: The cultural site 5ME6800 is being impacted by the original trail that was routed through the site in the late 1980's. At that time the floor of the shelter was protected by "paving" with rocks and tree branches making it unattractive for recreation use. This proved effective; however traffic has compacted the soil on the trail below the shelter and increased the runoff down the trail. This has led to erosion at the top of the drainage which originates at the shelter. Subsurface cultural strata are being exposed. The preferred action would be to reroute the trail above or below the shelter. If this is not practical evaluative testing should be conducted at the site to determine if intact cultural layers remain. Although the slope portion of the reroute was flagged, the new trail loop on top of the mesa was not flagged before inventory. The cultural survey was therefore conducted in the location the archaeologist thought that the trail would be constructed. The inventory route was collected by GPS and the location shape file will be provided to BLM recreation staff. If the trail needs to be built at a different location the archaeologist should survey the rerouted trail before construction. If newly discovered cultural resources are identified during project implementation, work in that area should stop and the BLM Authorized Officer should be notified immediately (36 CFR 800.13).

INVASIVE, NON-NATIVE SPECIES

Affected Environment: This area was inventoried for noxious weeds during the 2000 field season. Some small infestations of Russian knapweed were found at the trailhead and those have been treated.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: The small scale of the project should not have a significant impact from a weed standpoint. All of the trails in the NCA are periodically monitored by BLM personnel for new weed infestations on a time frame where new patches can be treated quickly.

MIGRATORY BIRDS

Affected Environment: The pinyon jay and gray vireo are the species on the US Fish & Wildlife Service's list of Birds of Conservation Concern that occur commonly in the area of the Rabbit's Ear Trail reroute. Other protected species also occur, with Scott's oriole and black-throated sparrow being the most notable ones.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: The trail rerouting action proposed does not threaten to directly harm any of these birds or their nesting activities.

NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS CONCERNS

Affected Environment: Cultural affiliation of 5ME6800 has not been determined. There are no known components of the site or area that are known to be of concern to members of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, or Uintah & Ouray Tribal Business Committee that traditionally used the area. If the trail is rerouted the site will be both physically and visually avoided by the project.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: There is no known evidence that suggests the project area or the site 5ME6800 hold special significance for Native Americans, or that the area is actively used to maintain traditional practices. If the site is tested the Ute Tribe will need to be consulted prior to testing. If the results indicate Ute affiliation information will be sent with an invitation for further consultation or a site visit.

THREATENED, ENDANGERED& SENSITIVE SPECIES (includes a finding on Standard 4)

Affected Environment: The only species protected under the federal Endangered Species Act that passes through the proposed project on the mesa top is the Bald Eagle. The BLM sensitive species, Yuma myotis bat, and plants, *Amsonia jonesii* and *Cryptantha osterhoutii* occur in the vicinity of the project, although no locations are known in the pathway of the project.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: Prior to trail construction the BLM listed plants *Cryptantha osterhoutii* and *Amsonia jonesii* and will be surveyed for by BLM personnel and a minimum buffer of 50 feet will be maintained between any plants found and the trail. There would be no affect on any of of the above mentioned species , because the nature of the work is either beneficial or innocuous to the needs of these species.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard 4 for Threatened & Endangered species: The proposed project area is meeting expectations under this standard and the proposed project would not disturb this situation.

WASTES, HAZARDOUS OR SOLID

Affected Environment: Neither hazardous nor solid wastes are a part of the affected environment.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: Encouraging more visitation to the area might result in a slight increase in solid waste in the form of litter but it appears the area will experience increased visitation whether or not the trail is improved. Users should be encouraged to pack their litter out and periodic trail/public lands cleanups should be considered if litter ever became a problem.

WATER QUALITY, SURFACE AND GROUND (includes a finding on Standard 5)

Affected Environment: The new trail would be within an upland area within the McDonald Creek watershed, while the proposed trial realignment would be within an unnamed watershed

that is tributary to the Colorado River. The trail would cross two drainages which are virtually dry. The exception is when runoff is generated from summer convective storms. Flow is projected to last less than one day with each runoff event. No water quality data have been collected in this area because it is dry. With the erosive character of the soils in the area, high sediment levels are projected with runoff events.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: The construction of the new trail is not projected to impact water quality. There is very limited watershed area and minor gradient above most of the proposed alignment, therefore little runoff is produced within the area. Concentrating use on a defined trail should reduce the impact to adjacent areas. This should reduce impact to the surrounding vegetation and litter, offering watershed cover which should minimize sediment production. Additionally the proposed realignment should reduce sediment production from an actively eroding portion of the trail. Stabilization and re-vegetation of that area should also reduce sediment production. In the area of the channel crossings management practices to minimize soil erosion and subsequent sediment production should be utilized. These may include reducing slope length while accessing and leaving the crossings, crossing at a 90 degree angle to flow, and minimizing disturbance to the streambed.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard 5 for water quality: No violation of water quality standards would occur with this action, therefore standard 5 would be met.

NON-CRITICAL ELEMENTS

The following elements **must** be addressed due to the involvement of Standards for Public Land Health:

SOILS

Affected Environment: Soils on the proposed trail additions and reroute are in two Soil Map Units (SMUs). Trail sections on the steeper sideslopes are in SMU 127, Rock Outcrop-Unnamed 127B and C complex, 25 to 99 percent slopes, extremely stony. Rock outcrop of interbedded sandstone and shale or hard sandstone makes up about 35 percent of the unit; stones and scattered boulders cover up to 15 percent of the surface. The soil components are shallow to deep, with surface textures of extremely channery clay loam and substrata of silty clay loam. Permeability is slow, runoff is rapid, and the erosion hazard is very high. The unit is in the Saltdesert Breaks ecological site. The mesa summit and benches are in SMU 67, Gladel-Bond-Rock outcrop complex, 3 to 25 percent slopes; rock outcrop (up to 20 percent) occurs as gently sloping to moderately steep outcroppings of interbedded sandstone and shale bedrock of the Entrada, Summerville, and Morrison Formations. Surface texture of these shallow soils is sandy loam, which overlies sandy clay loam to sandy loam at 8 to 14 inches over bedrock. Permeability is moderately rapid to moderately slow, runoff is medium, and the erosion hazard is high. This unit is in the Foothill Juniper ecological site.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: Trails should be located on the contour as much as possible to avoid accelerated soils loss on these easily eroded soils. Waterbars and well-placed

water turnouts should also be constructed where necessary to prevent excessive channeling of runoff and creation of “gullies”.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard 1 for upland soils: Construction and reroute of sections of trail as described in the Proposed Action would have very minimal impact on upland soils health in the overall area, and would not prevent Standard 1 from being met.

VEGETATION (includes a finding on Standard 3)

Affected Environment: The portion of the proposed action is the top of the Rabbitears Mesa. Vegetation consists of Juniper with associated shrubs, ephedra species, sagebrush, bitterbrush, ect and some grasses. The middle portion of the trail that is to be re-routed is located on the side slopes leading to the top of the mesa. Associated vegetation is Juniper with Salina Wild rye, sagebrush, ect.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: The new trail should be built to minimize vegetative disturbance, and soil erosion. Re-route should be in areas where soil erosion would be minimized (horizontal to slope) by moving vegetation and re-planting it to the old trail should help to recover the existing trail segment. With this being done standard three should be met for the area associated with the proposed action.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard 3 for plant and animal communities (partial, see also Wildlife, Aquatic and Wildlife, Terrestrial): Construction and reroute of the trail segments as described in the Proposed Action would have minimal impact on upland vegetation in the overall area, and would not prevent Standard 1 from being met.

WILDLIFE, AQUATIC (includes a finding on Standard 3)

Affected Environment: The proposed project area contains no aquatic wildlife.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: None required.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard 3 for plant and animal communities (partial, see also Vegetation and Wildlife, Terrestrial): No effects.

WILDLIFE, TERRESTRIAL (includes a finding on Standard 3)

Affected Environment: The mesa top is habitat for small to medium-sized wildlife typical of arid PJ woodland/black sagebrush and very rarely big game animals.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: Confining human trampling impacts improves the situation with wildlife habitat by reducing soil and vegetation loss and by increasing the predictability of human activity, which is important for wildlife species to adapt to it.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard 3 for plant and animal communities (partial, see also Vegetation and Wildlife, Aquatic): This area is meeting this standard, with problems generated by the

nearby interstate highway. The proposed action would help to preserve animal community integrity.

OTHER NON-CRITICAL ELEMENTS: For the following elements, those brought forward for analysis will be formatted as shown above.

Non-Critical Element	NA or Not Present	Applicable or Present, No Impact	Applicable & Present and Brought Forward for Analysis
Access	X		
Cadastral Survey	X		
Fire		X	
Forest Management		X	
Geology and Minerals		X	
Hydrology/Water Rights		X	
Law Enforcement	X		
Paleontology	X		
Noise	X		
Range Management		X	
Realty Authorizations		X	
Recreation			X
Socio-Economics	X		
Transportation	X		
Visual Resources	X		

NON-CRITICAL ELEMENTS ANALYSIS:

RECREATION

Affected Environment: The proposed action will enhance the recreation experience for visitors hiking this trail. The maintenance planned will improve the trail condition and the trail reroute will provide a more sustainable section of trail where erosion has been a problem. The construction of the loop on top of the mesa expands on the scenic overlook opportunity and provides an enjoyable backcountry hiking experience consistent with the social and physical setting characteristics prescribed for this recreation zone (Zone 1) in the Resource Management Plan.

Environmental Consequences/Mitigation: No special mitigation is required.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS SUMMARY: The actions proposed should benefit the cumulative impacts to the area by improving the existing trail situation; relocating from erosive locations to more sustainable locations, and taking actions to improve run-off in other locations to reduce erosion. Completion of the loop trail on top of the Mesa will concentrate dispersed use to one sustainable route that can be maintained as needed.

PERSONS / AGENCIES CONSULTED: BLM resource specialists and representatives from the Volunteers of Colorado (VOC) staff.

INTERDISCIPLINARY REVIEW

NAME	TITLE	AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY
Tom Bargsten	Surface Reclamation Specialist	Soils
Aline LaForge/ Meghan Murphy	Archaeologist	Cultural Resources, Native American Religious Concerns
Jim Cooper	Travel Management Specialist	Access & Transportation
Britta Laub/ Gene Arnesen	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Recreation, VRM, Wilderness, ACECs,
Wade Johnson	Interpretive Specilaist	Wild & Scenic Rivers, NCA
Jim Dollerschell	Range Management Specialist	Range, Wild Horse & Burro Act
Bruce Fowler	Geologist	Geology, Paleontology
Alan Kraus	Hazard Materials Specialist	Hazardous Materials
Robin Lacy	Reality Specialist	Land Status/Reality Authorizations
Ron Lambeth	Wildlife Biologist	Migratory Bird Treaty Act, T&E Species, Wildlife-Terrestrial
Harley Metz	Ecologist	Range, Land Health Assessment
Lynae Rogers	Range Management Specialist	Range, Riparian, Flood Plains
Jane Ross	Planning & Environmental Coordinator	Air Quality, Environmental Justice, Prime & Unique Farmlands, Environmental Coordinator
Jim Scheidt	Hydrologist	Water Quality, Hydrology, Water Rights
David L. Smith	Fisheries Biologist	T&E Species, Wildlife-Aquatic
David P. Stevens	Natural Resource Specialist	Forestry
Mark Taber	Range Management Specialist	Invasive, Non-Native Species (Weeds)
Tim Foley	Fire Management Officer	Fire

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CO-134-2005-010-EA

The environmental assessment and analyzing the environmental effects of the proposed action have been reviewed. The approved mitigation measures result in a Finding of No Significant Impact on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary to further analyze the environmental effects of the proposed action.

RATIONALE: The proposed action to construct approximately 2 miles of trail will have negligible adverse impact to the environment. The rerouting of the existing trail will have beneficial impacts to the environment by eliminating some sources of erosion and inhibiting the proliferation of braided trails. The trail construction will meet the objectives of the McInnis Canyons NCA RMP to offer hiking opportunities in this location.

DECISION RECORD

DECISION: It is my decision to authorize the construction of approximately 2 miles of new trail. This would extend the existing Rabbit Ear trail around the rim of Rabbit Ear Mesa creating a loop.

RATIONALE: This project will carry out a trail proposal set forth in the Resource Management Plan completed for McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area. Completion of the project will enhance the recreation setting for this geographic location and concentrate dispersed use/impacts to one sustainable route that can be more affectively maintained.

MITIGATION MEASURES: Prior to trail construction the BLM listed plants *Cryptantha osterhoutii* and *Amsonia jonesii* and will be surveyed for by BLM personnel and a minimum buffer of 50 feet will be maintained between any plants found and the trail.

COMPLIANCE/MONITORING: The condition of the trail will be periodically reviewed on the ground to determine if and when maintenance is needed. Park rangers and volunteers will continue to work with trail users to make sure they are informed of regulations and environmental principles such as "Leave No Trace" and "Tread Lightly". This particular area does not have a history of visitor abuse and should not require more than keeping visitors informed.

NAME OF PREPARER: Tommy Hayes & Gene Arnesen

NAME OF ENVIRONMENTAL COORDINATOR: /s/ Jane Ross DATE: May 31, 2005

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL: Paul Peck
Manager, McInnis Canyons NCA

DATE SIGNED: 6/2/05

ATTACHMENTS: Map: Blue lines are proposed trail modifications or new construction.

